2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

prepared to create and perform his entire tale within a reasonably short period of time.[3] He does not and cannot perform effectively in isolation. He is influenced immediately by the occasion of the tale, and the atmosphere in which and the audience for whom he is performing. His tale is designed not to be read but to be performed and heard. In written transcriptions of oral literature the words are captured on the page, while the real flavor of the tales and the real artistry of the teller—the actual narration, the actual "telling of the tale" by a gifted and skillful performer—are lost.

Because the many communicative techniques used in storytelling, both verbal and nonverbal, are outside the realm of written literature, until fairly recently they were not felt to be important in written interpretations of Sea Island or other oral traditions. Collections by Parsons and others are indeed excellent in the depiction of characteristic features of plot, but they are devoid of the many kinesic communicative techniques that a teller uses to engage his listeners' attention and actually mesmerize them with gestures—hand movements, a turning of the head, a long pause, a shifting of the eyes, a long knowing stare. Yet kinesics are a part of the oral performance, and much that is communicated through gesture has not been accounted for in written transcriptions of Sea Island oral literature. Even obvious verbal techniques like mimicry, repetition, ideophones (words which convey images and meaning through their sound), and rhetorical questions often fail to be taken into consideration, an omission that subtracts substantially from the beauty of the tales even as it obscures cultural methods of communication and expression.[4]

While it is too much to expect one discipline to teach us to be linguists, ethnologists, folklorists, and anthropologists, the common element among these and other disciplines is the commitment to interpreting and understanding the human interaction in language and culture. The need for interdisciplinary approaches to the study of human behavior is becoming increasingly more apparent. David DeCamp, for example, drew attention to this need for exchange of information and ideas between linguists and scholars in related fields as a result of his efforts to scale sequential language data to form what he calls a linguistic continuum. Though he was the first to apply the technique to linguistic data, DeCamp found that as a general procedure it has been known to psychologists and sociologists as the Guttman Scalogram Analysis for over twenty years.[5]

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

121 Dell Hymes also asserts that "a certain kind of information slips away" because of the lack of interdisciplinary approaches. To take an example, linguists, folklorists, and anthropologists rely on language samplings primarily for content, which provides an excellent means of delineating and analyzing elements of various cultures. Though folklorists and anthropologists may extract enough linguistic information to specify verbal genres—tales, prayers, myths, orations—they seldom specify features that one must know if one is actually to recognize instances of these genres in performance. On the other hand, linguists abstract grammar, for example, from speech data and tell us which utterances in sequences are grammatical and which are ungrammatical but they tell us little, if anything, about the various styles, modes, or contexts in which a given utterance may occur. Thus, while anthropologists acquire knowledge of social behavior and linguists acquire knowledge of language behavior, valuable information about cultures and language escapes when neither linguists nor anthropologists provide us with what Hymes calls the actual function of language within a society. We cannot assume, he goes on to say, that language has a homogenous function in every community, because ethnographic records suggest, for example, that "talk for talk's sake" is far from universal. Among the Gbaya of Central Africa, no one is regarded as skilled in narration; among the Wishram Chinook of the Columbia River, one does not talk when one has nothing that needs to be said; among the Paliyans of South India, by the age of forty men are reported as seldom speaking at all, and a talkative person is regarded with suspicion.[6]

121 • 201 In the area of nonverbal communication, Ray Birdwhistell discovered that body gestures in context had meaning "astonishingly like words in language." In the English, American, and German kinesic systems that he studied, he discovered that "there are body behaviors which function like significant sounds, that combine into simple or relatively complex units like words, which are combined into much longer stretches of structured behavior like sentences or even paragraphs." Gestures are culturally linked, and no one body position or motion can be said to be universal; no facial expression or body stance will convey the same meaning in every society.[7] Alfred Hayes summarizes Birdwhistell's basic assumptions underlying the systematic study of bodily movement and motions as follows:

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

121
•201

1. Like other events in nature, no body movement or expression is without meaning in the context in which it appears.
2. Like other aspects of human behavior, body posture, movement, and facial expression are patterned and thus, subject to systematic analysis.
3. While recognizing the possible limitations imposed by particular biological substrata, until otherwise demonstrated, the systematic body motion of the members of a community is considered a function of the social system to which the group belongs.
4. Visible body activity like audible acoustic activity systematically influences the behavior of other members of any particular group.
5. Until otherwise demonstrated such behavior will be considered to have an investigable communicational function.
6. The meanings derived therefrom are functions both of the behavior and of the operations by which it is investigated.
7. The particular biological system and the special life experience of any individual will contribute idiosyncratic elements to his kinesic system, but the individual or symptomatic quality of these elements can only be assessed following the analysis of the larger system of which his is a part.[8]

Some familiarity with body movements is important to the discussion of Sea Island literature because the performances of the individual are related to the function of the community of which he is a member, and have meaning in that context. Body expressions otherwise unique to certain African ancestral patterns may remain in the Sea Island communities, just as there are parallels in the language itself and in styles of dance and worship.

121
201
538

Included in this discussion are examples of individual performing styles which are variations on a larger system of community-expected and -accepted behavior patterns during a storytelling event. According to Richard Dorson, there is a "group repertoire." There are indeed patterns of movements characteristic of *inland* black storytellers which are directly related to the culture as a whole. It was once assumed that most people in a subculture told the same tales in the same way. There is a very definite repertoire of gestures common to southern black sto-

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

121 rytellers; every storyteller has command of these particular gestures
•201 and every southern black storyteller has these features in common with
538 other members of the group. On closer observation of individual performers, however, we see that there is much variation and individuality of style. Once the group repertoire has been established, we can more clearly see the distinctions among performers.[9]

538 Beyond the area of kinesics, other nonverbal communicative interactions include such intrinsic components as the setting and atmosphere for storytelling and the degree to which audience participation influences and is actually a part of a Sea Island tale. Lacking these essential elements, most written versions of Sea Island, Caribbean, and some West African literatures appear as short, loosely strung-together episodic tales. The tales alone are barren and incomplete. They do not show the frequent words and phrases interjected by the listeners, nor do they indicate the subtle manner in which the speaker calls on them actually to help him along in telling his tale. Phillip Noss elaborates on this point: "When one reads tales that are meant to be presented orally, usually in a language other than the original, with little awareness of the cultural setting or the aesthetic principles and assumptions underlying the tale, it is not surprising if he concludes that the tales are merely action-packed episodes involving stock characters whose only dimension may be comic."[10]

The Western reader has been conditioned to judge language and literature through preconceived notions of the content of what an author writes, the organization and degree of development, and the style of the writing. The words are not heard, but a good writer's fervent hope is that the impact of the words will be felt, and consequently much of the writer's effort must be devoted to this task. In oral literature the performance, inclusive of audience participation, is as important as and in most cases more important than the actual content of the tale. For not only are the words heard, visualized, and felt, the whole narrative is actually experienced as one experiences a play. The characters that the performer creates are only as vivid and lifelike as the teller is able to make them. And how vivid they are made is often dependent on how enthusiastic the audience is. An excellent performer, when he
538 slaps his hands together and says "Bam! That one stuck!" can make
201 the audience experience the impact of the blow that Ber Rabbit delivers to the tar baby. As the speaker gradually raises his hand higher and higher in the air to indicate the height to which the buzzard takes the

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

monkey from the ground far below (see "The Buzzard and the Monkey" in Chapter 3), the audience shares the imbalance and giddiness that the monkey feels. With varying degrees of animation, the teller can, like the writer, hypnotize his listeners and compel them to suspend any disbelief and fully participate in the events of the tale. But unlike the written word, which can be enjoyed in solitude, whenever and for however long the reader may wish, effective oral presentation is dependent on many factors that are peripheral to the tale itself. The occasion on which a tale is told, the audience to which it is told, and the style and technique of the person doing the telling, among other factors, cannot be ignored in attempting to read written versions of tales which are meant to be presented orally. These external forces are as much a part of oral literature as character development and tightly knit plot are of written literature.

The Setting

The Sea Island tradition has been to tell tales (called "lies" by the islanders) as a form of entertainment. The advent of bridges and electricity, however, has brought about significant changes in the occasions for telling folktales. On more remote islands storytelling is still a common practice, and it is still fairly easy to get a "telling" started. On the more industrialized islands television, with its talking pictures, has all but eliminated the need for oral literature as a form of entertainment. Yet, given the choice, most children seem to favor human contact with a person who really knows how to perform a tale over being entertained by television.

In Africa and on the Sea Islands folktelling is an informal social event with no set place for telling or listening to tales. Any place where people often congregate to talk, or just to sit and listen, is a good place for a telling to begin. I collected some tales under trees, in open fields, riding in the back of pickup trucks, and while shark fishing. Others I obtained at island stores, around fire sites, at juke joints, in front of fireplaces, on front porches, and down on the creek banks. I heard still others in the comfort and privacy of the tellers' homes. All but the last were places where people congregated and the teller had enough people for an audience response.

On rainy days, which are prevalent on the islands owing to their

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

538 call for assistance is a device to keep the audience abreast of the details by pretending that some part of the tale has been temporarily forgotten. Often the member of the audience called upon will reply, "That's the way it happened" or "You are telling it right!" Even if the speaker is not telling a story in just the way a member of the audience remembers it, seldom will anyone openly dispute the manner in which the tale is told. This is apparently an unwritten rule of courtesy of both Igbo and Gullah cultures.

In addition to pretending to forget, a speaker may turn to a particular respondent, call him by name, and ask, for example, "You know what I mean, don't you, Doc?" The Sea Island respondent may then answer, "Ki! I know what you mean, man!" This is a reassuring device for both speaker and audience because the other members as well will usually answer, "I know what you mean! I know what you mean!" Likewise, in the narration of a historical event, members of the audience who are familiar with the event may inject a word of understanding or support by adding a personal comment, such as "I remember . . . I remember the place." The audience may encourage the speaker by calling out, "Tell the story . . . tell the story!"

[171] Another practice characteristic of Gullah and Igbo, Yoruba, and Ibebio speakers in particular is that of telling a tale seemingly for one individual. A speaker may single out a person whom he knows, or one whom he may not know well, and seem to speak directly to this person, ignoring all others. He has eye contact with this one hearer alone 538 and may even turn his back to other members of the audience sitting 209 next to him. This turning of the back is fairly common in some West [171] African communities and is apparently not a discourteous practice; I have never seen it offend any member of the groups observed. In fact, two informants on the Sea Islands who are close friends and avid storytellers often turn their backs to each other or sit sideways so that they are neither facing nor sitting directly next to each other. When they tell [201] tales, each one acts as a respondent for the other, yet they turn around only when some point to be stressed requires the use of the hands as a 209 visual aid. In most Western cultures, turning one's back to another person is an overt sign of disregard or disrespect. In Sea Island communities, however, one can observe this behavior in churches or other gathering places. Two men will often sit on each end of a church bench in such a manner that their backs are turned slightly away from each

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

159
538 were often spread to emphasize a point, or his leg would swing back and forth like a pendulum to suggest the passage of time. When not emphasizing a point, he often rotated his hand at the wrist as if keeping silent time with the rhythm of the tale. Facial expressions and voice modulations were an important part of his personal delivery. For example, many informants told the tale "Ber Rabbit and the Tar Baby." However, when Ber Rabbit begged the man not to throw him in the briar patch, Mr. Ted gave meaning to the word *beg*. His voice became whiny and whimpering, and his face took on the appearance of one in great distress. He squinched his eyes, wrinkled his nose, and in a high-pitched voice said, "Ple-e-e-ase don't throw me in there." On the page these words are almost lifeless, but when he uttered them in conjunction with such movements as making faces, raising his arms to his chest, crooking his hands and fingers, and trembling as if in mortal terror, the listeners went wild with laughter. What he said in his tales seemed almost irrevelant when compared to the many movements, expressions, and exaggerations that he used in actually performing a given tale.

Most of Mr. Ted's tales ended with a moral; if one was not readily apparent, he made one up. He liked to do what he considered moralizing and philosophizing about life. The language of his tales was contemporary Gullah, with such features as the preverbal markers *de, ben, bina,* and *don;* lack of inflections like *-ed* and *-ing;* and little of the subject-verb concord that one expects in standard English. These features, which among others distinguished his speech as contemporary Gullah and not black English or standard English (see Chapter 4), were part of what made his tales so appealing to other Gullah speakers. If he had approximated a form of standard English, as he sometimes did (see "Peter and the Rock," for instance—the switch is very obvious) he would not have been telling the tale in the language and style of the Gullah-speaking community.

Mr. James Oree is quite the opposite of Mr. Ted. He is approximately thirty-six years old. He seldom attends church; he drinks in excess; and he loves to be among the sweet ladies of the community who "like for have good time!" He enjoys his life immensely. He claims to have worked hard when he was able to work. Recently, however, he has been in failing health, and work has not "agreed" with him. Those who know him like him well. He is generally a very talk-

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

159
538

> [Again he swayed back and forth as if counting to himself.] De dup . . . de dup . . . de dup, going in [a pause], going in that wood, you know. Bi-i-i-g oat field."

Likewise, he imitated the chittering sound of the partridge as he inadvertently follows Ber Rabbit into the open oat field:

> Partridge . . . Ha! . . . [He paused as if contemplating the partridge's character.] He *crazy*, you know! . . . He ain't know that Ber Rabbit done got him! He gone. . . . He gone out there. He kickeri, kickeri. [Suddenly he opened his eyes and slapped his hands together.]
>
> Bam!
>
> Dead!

At this point in the speaker's narrative, his listeners had become rather involved with the suspense of his tale. It is unlikely that he would have been more effective if he had been more prolix or more descriptive. He elicited a gasp of amazement from his listeners merely by slapping his hands together to imitate the blast from the gun (*Bam!*) and by conveying the partridge's swift and instant death in the simple word *Dead!*

• [201]

538 The absence of very much description in Mr. Oree's accounts is typical of Sea Island tales. The language that is used, however, suggests to the mind far more detail than could ever be set down. For example, the mention of a big oat field evokes colors (shades of browns, beiges, and greens) and a sense of vastness and openness. By choosing not to describe every detail of a scene, the narrators permit the listeners to create in their own minds certain images and impressions which give the tale added dimension. This, then, may account in part for the usual description of Sea Island literature, in written transcription, as short, incomplete, and lacking in the characteristics of sustained literary work. These standards, of course, are standards by which Western cultures have traditionally judged written literature, and they just do not apply to the literature of a people whose tradition has always been oral.

159
538 Again, as I noted, gestures were not an inherent part of Mr. Oree's style; rather, it was his whole body posture—sitting, half reclining, eyes half closed, his feet apart, his arms and hands turned slightly inward and resting on his lap—which seemed to communicate to his audience. But just as, according to Birdwhistell, all body movement or

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

159
539 style does, however, represent a method of expression characteristic of many Sea Island folk narrators, which is anything but comic.

159
538 During my stay, most of Mr. Henry's tales were told on his front porch, with people gathered around him. One unusual feature of his delivery was that, even at one hundred years old, he always stood when he was ready to begin a narrative, though unlike Mr. Ted, Mr. Henry seldom walked around as he talked. Amid his listeners, he stood erect and composed in one spot during the whole course of his narrative, which could go on for hours. Many times his wife (now deceased) came and asked him to eat lunch or dinner, or just to let the visitors go home; in the latter case he continued speaking as he followed us to the car.

Sometimes during a long narrative he would stop, take out his handkerchief, wipe his face, and seem to stare out across the open field in front of his home. At these times it was quite obvious that his narrative had brought to his mind memories of times gone past. His eyes, which he himself said would not see much that they had not seen before, became moist. But it was incommensurate with his manner to lose his dignity and composure. Thus, grasping his cane more firmly, he stood quiet, firm and serene, until the moment passed and he was ready to continue his narrative.

Like Mr. Oree, Mr. Henry seemed to command attention through his bodily presence. But in contrast to the casual style characteristic of Mr. Oree, Mr. Henry captivated his audience with seriousness. With his feet planted firmly on the floor, arms held at his side, he made few gestures. To stress a point, he would perhaps raise one arm and point with his entire hand, as opposed to one finger. The other arm generally remained immobile at his side, with the hand slightly opening and closing in a half fist. Little else moved. His face was expressive, but for the most part he told his narratives, one after the other, standing in the same spot.

His voice was strong and clear in spite of his age. While he spoke, silence pervaded the audience. Even children felt the need to whisper a complaint in his presence. His age was certainly a factor, in that the islanders have much respect for the elderly in their communities, especially a member as exalted as Mr. Henry. Nevertheless, his age was not the primary ingredient in his success as an oral artist. His descriptions were very detailed. He made exceptional use of pauses, seem-

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

159 present wife. He admits to directing appreciating glances at a fine-looking woman even today, but says that a look is the extent of his appreciation.

Mr. Mickell attended elementary school on Johns Island, but because he had to work to help support his family, he was forced to quit school during the elementary grades. Yet he has done well for himself. He was in the navy and has worked on various jobs from handyman to longshoreman. He now lives a rather tranquil but satisfying life, with a degree of comfort slightly more sumptuous than that of many islanders.

159 538 Mr. Mickell is a gifted storyteller. Many of the tales I heard him tell have direct parallels with some told in Nigeria (see "Ber Rabbit and the Lord"). His speaking style is as characteristic of Sea Island speech as the other informants'. He speaks very rapidly with a very high pitch and tone. In fact, I sometimes found it extremely difficult to understand him when he became engrossed in a narrative. The problem with interpretation was not with his vocabulary, though he knew many old words with African origins; the problem was primarily a phonological one. The rhythm, tempo, and stress with which he pronounced the English words is really one of the most outstanding characteristics of contemporary Gullah speech. Though I had difficulty adjusting to his delivery, the audience composed of speakers born and raised on the Sea Islands had no problem at all, as would be expected.

I found Mr. Mickell's most distinguishing feature to be his use of gestures and repetition. A rapid rate of speaking, sustained high pitch, and strong rhythm are characteristic of the community. Mr. Mickell, however, spoke more quickly than others. The rapid speaking style was enough in itself to create excitement, but the method by which Mr. Mickell used repetition, whether in words or phrases or in parallel structure, helped to intensify the excitement in his rapid series of action-packed episodes. In one tale, for example, he described how a king snake is able to kill other snakes. He conveyed the striking manner in which the king snake coils itself around its victim through a series of words repeated rapidly in succession, "Wrap up, wrap up, wrap up." To illustrate this action, he made his hands into fists and rolled them rapidly over and over in front of him, completing the coiling gesture with a "pssssup" to indicate that the victim is completely immobile within the coils. To show how the king snake stretches its victim and shatters its spinal cord in one quick motion, Mr. Mickell

159 • 201 538

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

slowly pulled his fist apart to suggest a slow stretching process, saying, "Stretch out, stretch out, stretch out." Then, in a sweeping motion, he tightened his fist and with one violent jerk emphasized the king snake's ultimate quick, spasmodic motion.

Mr. Mickell is a great talker. The speech samples I obtained from him ranged from childhood experiences to tales of the bizarre. He is a good singer and participates in the shouts with enthusiasm. But the outstanding feature in his repertoire is a collection of dozens and dozens of riddles. Riddling is a pastime activity common among the older Sea Island men and women. In fact, Mr. Mickell and one of his close friends often sat for hours telling riddles until one or the other ran out of riddles to tell.

Without a doubt, *Aneatha Brisbane, Miss Myma,* is my closest link to the Sea Island communities. She was born in a shanty, still standing on Wadmalaw Island, and never really ventured far from the site on which it now stands. Her mother lived in the shanty before Miss Myma was born, and when she died, Miss Myma continued to live there until she purchased a one-bedroom trailer some fifteen or twenty years ago. The trailer was a weather-beaten shell of a home consisting of a living room, a kitchen, and a bedroom. It had no running water, no electricity, and no toilet, though it was equipped with appropriate connections. I soon understood that while these things are primary for survival for most Americans, to stay on the Sea Islands I had to be ready to live without them. I learned to adjust my eyes to the kerosene lamp that Miss Myma lit so that I could read after nightfall. I learned to make sure that we got wood in to burn in the potbellied wood stove to warm the house in the cool mornings. I learned that if I filled a number-three tub with water from a neighbor's well in the morning and set it in the hot island sun all day, the water would be just the right temperature for a refreshing bath in the evening.

Miss Myma is a very sophisticated-looking woman, with high cheek bones, reddish brown skin that she says she acquired from the Wadmalaw Indians, and the most beautiful white hair I ever saw. She is naturally friendly, smokes a pipe, and is said to have been very lively in her younger days. She is soft-spoken and generally restrained in her language (though I have heard some of her women friends use words which would make the vulgarest of men shrink in shame). Her manner can be deceiving, however. I observed her once in an argument with

[TEXT CONTINUED ON PAGE 62]

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

538

2. will usually respond overtly to a good storyteller by injecting words of praise or understanding such as "Yeah," "That's right," or "I know what you mean" during the entire course of a tale;
3. will usually expect the performer to end with a dynamic closing and express their appreciation of his tale by saying, "That's all right" or "You sure enough know how for tell good tale";
4. will usually harmonize the rate, rhythm, pitch, and loudness of their responses to accord with those of the performer;
5. will usually communicate with people nearby either nonverbally, through head nods, handshakes, approving or disapproving glances, or other communicative techniques, or verbally, through words and phrases like "You hear what he de say," "Yeah, man!" and others.

(201)

The storyteller is only one of the ingredients necessary for seeing and hearing a good tale. The tradition dictates that the storyteller cannot perform alone. Not only must he be in a place conducive to telling a good tale, but he must have an interested and responsive audience in order to do his best performing. When all these ingredients are mixed in proportion, the performances of both the teller and the listeners are commensurate with traditional Sea Island social practices. The dependence of one on the other remains as apparent in everyday interactions on the Sea Islands as it does in the African cultures of the Igbo, Yoruba, Ibebio, and others from which the Sea Islanders are descended and from whose folktales their stories are said to have been derived.